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Best Dolphin Tours on Florida's Gulf Coast: Dive In

By **Kimberly Morgan**

Florida's Gulf Coast shorelines offer more to love than just shelling, great beaches, and fantastic seafood. What many visitors to the area don't realize is that Florida's west coast is home to a large dolphin population. If you're interested in seeing wild dolphins in their natural habitat, however, don't simply pull a name out of the phone book or tour map. Tourism done the wrong way can literally love these wonderful sea mammals to death.

Your best bet is to choose a tour certified with the [Dolphin SMART Program](#), a voluntary course run by NOAA and the National Marine Sanctuaries that educates tour providers in responsible tour practices, advertising, and the reduction of impact by tourism on the dolphins themselves. Eco-minded dolphin tour groups in the area that have completed this training include the following:

Captiva Island, Near Sanibel (Personal Charter)

"I see dolphins on almost every trip. We do a lot of shelling and island hopping," says [Captain Brian Holaway](#), a Dolphin SMART program graduate and guide, one of only two small boat captains to receive this honor and the only operating on the southwest coast of Florida. His tours offer a more personal eco-tour with a seasoned professional. Read through his blog and get a taste of the sort of up-close and meaningful experiences to be had in the mangroves and marshes around Captiva. If you're interested in seeing natural Florida the way it's meant to be encountered - on its own terms - and you don't like the feel of larger tours, you might find just what you need here. His tours are ideal for photographers who wish for more secluded excursions away from the city and closer to the shoreline. Rates vary depending on your tour (from \$95 per hour to \$350 for four hours), so [contact him directly](#) at 293-989-6522.

Fort De Soto, Tierra Verde (For Small- to Medium-Sized Groups)

Even after your 90-minute dolphin [Eco-Adventure](#) is concluded, there's plenty to take in at historical [Fort De Soto](#). While the fort itself is one of the nation's treasures, the skiff that sets out each weekend makes the trip to Pinellas County worth the drive. Operated by United Park Services, the Betty provides very small groups an up-close view of the best of these protected waterways and their lovely inhabitants, the dolphins. The cost for adults and children 12 and up is \$19.95 per person, \$12.95 for kids under 12. Be sure to wear your sunscreen and a hat - even though the skiff is covered, you'll get plenty of sun on this adventure. Call for the campground store at 727-866-9191 for reservations.

Florida Aquarium, Channelside, Downtown Tampa (Accommodates Large Groups)

Stepping into [The Florida Aquarium](#) gives any visitor a chance to see a multitude of sea creatures up close, but those aren't the only fish tales you could bring home: The Wild Dolphin Ecotour departs daily (weather-permitting) from the aquarium. Costs for a 90-minute tour aboard the catamaran Bay Spirit II are as follows: Adults \$39.95, \$31.95 for seniors, and kids age 3-12 ride for \$27.95 (ages 2 and under board free). Group rates are also available.

With our large native dolphin population and miles of unspoiled coastline, there's plenty of Florida's west coast to enjoy, but only one way to really see dolphins in their natural habitat, and that's the SMART way.

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